

FREE GUIDE

Building Your Coping Skills Toolkit

Practical, proven strategies for managing anxiety, stress, and overwhelming emotions. Techniques you can use right now, between therapy sessions, and for the rest of your life.

8 pages | Printable | Shareable

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You do not have to white-knuckle through hard moments. These tools actually help.

What Is a Coping Skill (and Why Do You Need a Toolkit)?

A coping skill is any strategy that helps you manage difficult emotions without making things worse. The key phrase is "without making things worse" — because we all cope. The question is whether your current coping strategies are healthy (exercise, talking to someone, deep breathing) or unhealthy (avoidance, substance use, overeating, isolation).

Think of this guide as a toolbox. Just as a carpenter does not use a hammer for every job, you should not rely on a single coping strategy for every situation. Different moments call for different tools. The more tools you have, the better equipped you are.

How to Use This Guide

- Read through all the techniques once
 - Try each one at least twice (skills get easier with practice)
 - Star the ones that work best for you
 - Practice them when you are calm — do not wait until crisis mode to learn a new skill
 - Keep this guide accessible: save it on your phone, print it, or keep it by your bed

Breathing Techniques

Controlled breathing is the fastest way to activate your parasympathetic nervous system (the "rest and digest" system) and turn off the stress response. These are not woo-woo relaxation tricks. They are neurological interventions.

1. Box Breathing (4-4-4-4)

Used by Navy SEALs and first responders to stay calm under extreme pressure.

1. Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 seconds
2. Hold your breath for 4 seconds
3. Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 seconds
4. Hold empty for 4 seconds
5. Repeat 4-6 cycles

2. The 4-7-8 Technique

Particularly effective for falling asleep and calming intense anxiety.

1. Inhale through your nose for 4 seconds
2. Hold for 7 seconds
3. Exhale slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds (pursed lips, like blowing through a straw)
4. Repeat 3-4 cycles

3. Physiological Sigh

Research from Stanford shows this is the fastest single-breath technique for calming down.

1. Take a deep breath in through your nose
2. At the top of that breath, take a second short sniff in (filling lungs completely)
3. Exhale slowly and completely through your mouth
4. Just one cycle can reduce your heart rate. Repeat as needed.

Grounding Techniques

Grounding pulls you out of your head and back into the present moment. It is especially useful for panic attacks, flashbacks, dissociation, and spiraling anxiety.

The 5-4-3-2-1 Method

Engage all five senses to anchor yourself in the present:

- 5 things you can SEE: Look around and name them. "I see the blue wall. I see the clock. I see my hands."
- 4 things you can TOUCH: Feel the texture. "I feel the chair under me. I feel my feet on the floor."
- 3 things you can HEAR: Listen carefully. "I hear the fan. I hear traffic. I hear my breathing."
- 2 things you can SMELL: "I smell coffee. I smell fresh air."
- 1 thing you can TASTE: "I taste the mint from my toothpaste."

Cold Water Reset

Cold activates the dive reflex, which immediately slows your heart rate and calms the nervous system:

- Splash cold water on your face (especially forehead and cheeks)
 - Hold an ice cube in your hands
 - Put a cold washcloth on the back of your neck
 - Step outside in cold air and take slow breaths

Body Scan

Close your eyes. Starting from your toes, slowly move your attention up through your body. Notice where you are holding tension. Do not try to fix it — just notice it. By the time you reach the top of your head (about 2-3 minutes), your nervous system will have shifted.

Movement Grounding

- Press your feet firmly into the floor and notice the pressure
 - Squeeze your hands into fists and then release
 - Do 10 jumping jacks or push-ups (physical exertion burns off stress hormones)
 - Walk and deliberately notice each step: "heel, toe, heel, toe"

Thought Challenging (Simplified CBT)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) teaches that our thoughts drive our feelings, and many of our automatic thoughts are distorted. This simplified worksheet helps you challenge unhelpful thinking patterns:

Step 1: What happened?

(The situation — just the facts)

Step 2: What am I thinking?

(The automatic thought that popped into my head)

Step 3: What am I feeling?

(Name the emotion and rate it 1-10)

Step 4: Is this thought 100% true?

(What evidence supports it? What evidence contradicts it?)

Step 5: What would I tell a friend?

(We are often kinder to others than to ourselves)

Step 6: A more balanced thought:

(Not falsely positive — just more accurate)

Example: "I failed the test, so I am stupid" becomes "I failed the test, which is disappointing, but one test does not define my intelligence. I can study differently next time."

Daily Mood and Anxiety Tracker

Tracking your mood helps you identify patterns, recognize triggers, and communicate more effectively with your doctor or therapist. Rate each item 1-10 (1 = worst, 10 = best). Fill this out at the same time each day.

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Mood							
Anxiety							
Sleep Quality							
Energy							
Coping							
Triggers / Notes:							

Patterns to Look For

- Does your mood dip on certain days? (e.g., Mondays, after weekends alone)
 - Is anxiety worse in the morning or evening?
 - How does sleep quality affect the next day's mood?
 - What triggers are recurring?
 - Are coping strategies improving over time?

More Tools for Your Toolkit

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Systematically tense and release muscle groups to reduce physical tension:

1. Start with your feet. Curl your toes tightly for 5 seconds. Release and notice the difference.
2. Move to calves: tense for 5 seconds, release.
3. Continue through thighs, stomach, chest, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, and face.
4. The whole sequence takes about 5-10 minutes. Many people fall asleep during PMR, making it an excellent bedtime tool.

Journaling Prompts for Hard Days

- "Right now I am feeling..." (name it without judging it)
 - "The thing that is bothering me most is..."
 - "What would I tell my best friend if they felt this way?"
 - "One thing I can control right now is..."
 - "Something I am grateful for today is..." (even on terrible days, find one small thing)
 - "What I need most right now is..."

The STOP Technique (for Impulsive Moments)

- S — Stop. Pause whatever you are doing.
- T — Take a breath. One slow, deep breath.
- O — Observe. What am I feeling? What am I about to do? Will it help or hurt?
- P — Proceed. Choose a response instead of reacting.

Behavioral Activation (for Depression)

Depression tells you to do nothing. Behavioral activation says: do something small anyway. Action creates motivation (not the other way around).

- Start with the smallest possible step: get out of bed, brush your teeth
 - Schedule one small activity today: a 10-minute walk, calling a friend
 - Do not wait to feel like it. You will feel like it after you start, not before.
 - Track your activities and mood. You will see that doing things you feel.

When Coping Skills Are Not Enough

Coping skills are powerful, but they have limits. They are designed to help you manage symptoms, not replace professional treatment. It is time to seek additional help if:

- You are using coping skills daily and still struggling to function
 - Anxiety or depression is interfering with work, school, or relationships despite your best efforts
 - You are relying on unhealthy coping strategies (alcohol, drugs, self-harm, isolation) more than healthy ones
 - You have thoughts of suicide or self-harm
 - Panic attacks are frequent and unpredictable
 - You feel like you are going through the motions but not actually getting better

Coping skills and professional treatment are not either/or. They work best together.

Therapy teaches you new skills and helps you understand the root causes. Medication, when needed, creates the neurochemical foundation that makes skills more effective. And daily practice builds the resilience that carries you between appointments.

Your Personal Coping Plan

Circle or star the techniques from this guide that work best for you, and write them here:

My go-to breathing technique:

My favorite grounding exercise:

My thought-challenging reminder:

My physical activity for stress:

My person I can call:

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This guide is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Always consult with a qualified healthcare provider for diagnosis and treatment.